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S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 04 ABU DHABI 004061

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 11/08/2014
TAGS: [KISL](#) [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [TC](#)
SUBJECT: UAE minimizing influence of Islamic extremists

Ref: (A) Abu Dhabi 3783, (B) Abu Dhabi 3319, (C) Dubai
3033, (D) Abu Dhabi 2524, (E) Abu Dhabi 1766, (F) USDAO IIR
6 931 0014 04, (G) 03 Abu Dhabi 3565, (H) 02 Abu Dhabi 5813

(U) Classified by Ambassador Michele J. Sison, reasons 1.4
(b) and (d).

¶1. (C) Summary: Over the past several years, senior UAE ruling family members have shared concerns with us about a small, yet potentially harmful Islamic extremist movement in their politically and socially moderate federation, and they have outlined their efforts to minimize this extremist influence before it gains a foothold. We expect that Western-leaning ruling family members such as Abu Dhabi Crown Prince and Armed Forces Chief of Staff Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed will continue to promote moderate Islam, principally by tightening security and reforming education. End Summary.

Overview of Political Islam in the UAE

¶2. (C) In the UAE, there is no dominant school of Sunni Islam; the Malaki, Hanafi, Salafi, and Hanbali schools all have followers among the Sunni population (85 % of the total Emirati population). There is also a small indigenous Shi'a community (15% of the total Emirati population). There is an acknowledged Salafi (highly conservative and Wahhabi-influenced) presence in the UAE (Ref. G). Senior Abu Dhabi ruling family members, including Sheikh Mohammed and his brothers Hamdan bin Zayed (Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of State for Foreign Affairs), Hamdan bin Zayed (Deputy Prime Minister and

Minister of State for Foreign Affairs), and Hazza bin Zayed (Director, State Security Department), and Dubai Crown Prince Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum (Defense Minister) have told us that they are very concerned about the potential influence of extremists on UAE society, which they have worked to minimize.

¶3. (C) The poor economic conditions in the Northern Emirates (Sharjah, Ajman, Ras Al Khaimah, Umm Al Qaiwain, and Fujairah), compared to the wealth of Abu Dhabi and Dubai, may be a factor in breeding resentment among some UAE nationals who have limited opportunities for gainful employment, academics and journalists have told us. These conditions may make some who feel disadvantaged more susceptible to the messages of extremists. As of yet, there is no identifiable or cohesive Islamist political movement, although some of our contacts say that the number of Emiratis with religiously conservative views is increasing. Political science professor Ebtisam Al Kitbi warned that the combination of backward economic conditions and extremism in certain parts of the UAE could present a potent threat. Al Kitbi said there is another dimension to consider: "People are turning to fundamentalism as they see what the U.S. is doing. They see an attack on their culture and their religion."

UAEG Strategies to Combat Extremism

¶4. (C) The UAEG has long employed a quiet but focused strategy for identifying Islamic extremists and then acting to reduce their ability to engage in political activities. In the year after the 9/11 attacks, those efforts were dramatically expanded, and the government rounded up 160 individuals suspected of ties with extremist groups (Ref. H). Most of them have since been released. In addition, the UAEG has monitored groups and individuals deemed to be Islamist and/or affiliated with the Muslim Brotherhood (Ref. G). On the religious front, the Ministry of Justice and Islamic Affairs has required preachers to adhere to sermons with themes that have been pre-approved by the Ministry. In education, teachers deemed extremists have been quietly dismissed or given non-teaching positions. On the security front, there has been an intensification of border surveillance. And in their diplomatic activities, Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed and his brothers Hamdan and Hazza rarely fail to tell high-level USG interlocutors about the threat to stability posed by the "Muslim Brotherhood," their generic term for extremists.

¶5. (S) On the religious front, the UAE is closely monitoring the activities of mosques. Justice and Islamic Affairs Minister Mohammed bin Nukheira Al Dhaheri talked about the need for even greater oversight of Friday sermons in an interview with Al Ittihad newspaper on September 18. He acknowledged that some recent sermons had deviated from the Justice Ministry's pre-approved topics. The government has removed some clerics for re-education purposes after they used their Friday sermons inappropriately (Ref. F). Speaker after speaker at an international conference on Islam organized by the UAE Ministry of Justice, Islamic Affairs, and Awqaf on October 25-30, condemned extremism. The conference was "a wake-up call for Muslims to return to the true essence and teachings of Islam," scholar Mansoor Al Minhali, Director of Islamic Affairs at the Ministry of Justice, told the press.

¶6. (S) On the security front, Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed told USTR Zoellick on October 14 that terrorism was a major threat for the UAE, and that it was important to face it preemptively and not wait for a major incident. The UAE has been constructing a 525-mile long wall along its land border with the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and Oman to keep out individuals deemed a security risk, as well as smugglers and economic migrants. The Emiratis are also deploying eight squadrons to border patrol posts to investigate attempted border incursions. Members of the UAE armed forces are under orders to keep their facial hair

short to demonstrate their non-secular piety. Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed said the UAE had detained closed to 30 Al Qaida operatives, many of whom were transiting the UAE (Note: UAEG figure; likely includes individuals detained/arrested representing groups ranging from IMU to Ansar Al Islam. End note) The security services continuously monitor Islamists' phone conversations.

Schools as ideological battleground

17. (C) The country's public schools and universities have seen some of the most sweeping aspects of the crackdown against Islamists, but they are also the arena where modernists hope to make the most gains. In the mid-1980s, attempts to reform primary and secondary schools curricula met with strong resistance within the UAE, including from the current ruler of Sharjah, a moderate and modern Islamist. Sharjah has had a conservative outlook for some time, requiring women to dress modestly and outlawing the sale of alcohol. Sharjah's ruler has fostered close ties to the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, and may have received some financial support from the Saudi government. Khalifa Bakhit Al Falasi, who served previously as Under Secretary, Ministry of Education and Youth, told Polchief that when he sought to replace or reassign about 300 Saudi teachers deemed too religiously conservative, a Saudi cleric issued a fatwa against him. The government had to arrange for him to leave the country for his own safety, but he still blames the UAE leadership for sacrificing reforms for the sake of maintaining their good relations with Saudi Arabia. "The sheikhs are a little better nowadays, in large part because of 9/11 and the American response to terrorism," he said. The Ministry's current Under Secretary, Jamal Al Mehairi, agreed that momentum for reform was slowed by the resistance from Islamists in the 1980s and 1990s, and conceded that reforms the Ministry is promoting today still face some resistance from religious conservatives.

18. (C) Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed told Counterterrorism Coordinator Cofer Black on September 16 that he is convinced extremists have a plan to "hijack" the UAE curriculum (ref C). He and others said the Muslim Brotherhood's influence in the Gulf dates back to the 1950s when Egyptian and Syrian teachers spread across the region. They have concentrated on Arabic, history, and Islamic religion, all key components of the UAE curriculum. "We are having a (culture) war with the 'Muslim Brotherhood' in this country," Sheikh Mohammed said.

19. (C) The Ministry of Education's Al Mehairi said critics of educational reform believe the UAE is reacting to U.S. pressure in the wake of the 9/11 attacks. He maintained that the government had begun reviewing the curriculum before 9/11, but that the effort was given added momentum after the attacks. (Note: This is a concern that extends beyond extremists: even non-Islamist UAE nationals in Dubai have expressed shock at what they claim was a recent decision by the Government of Oman, supposedly taken at the behest of the USG, to expunge politically unacceptable portions of the Koran from Omani religious studies textbooks. End note) Among the measures that have been taken, he said, are the gradual replacement of the large population of expatriate Arab teachers in the public schools with Emirati nationals. In the summer of 2002 alone, 90 non-Emiratis were let go (i.e. early retirement) or reassigned to non-teaching jobs, Al Mehairi said. Curriculum-wise, he cited changes in the religion syllabus. Before, he noted, students memorized everything without understanding what they were memorizing. That has changed with a greater emphasis on comprehension. Teachers of Islam have had to be re-trained as part of the reforms instituted by the Education Ministry. Particularly significant is the fact that the Arabic and Islamic Studies curriculum was the first one to be tackled by the curriculum reform initiated by the consultants working at Zayed University. It has been put in place for grades 1-3 at the start of the 2004-05 school year, and the results

thus far are satisfactory, Al Mehairi said. Inspectors regularly monitor classrooms to ensure that teachers are following the new guidelines.

¶10. (C) The ideological battle is also taking place on some college campuses, and the UAE University in particular. Several Arab (including Emirati) deans, and one Arab-American dean, have been replaced by non-Arab Americans because the government deemed the Americans to be more qualified to implement the reforms the Education Ministry wanted, including instruction in English, UAEU education professor Khalifa Al Suweidi told Polchief. Al Suweidi said the government has done the right thing by committing itself to reform, however, there is still a problem with implementation. Islamic fundamentalists and extremists, he added, may be the least of the educational administration's problems. As with the primary and secondary public school system, many conservative educators have been replaced or reassigned. "The problem is that there is a lack of vision of how to implement the reforms. There is a kind of paralysis," Al Suweidi said.

Identifying the problem in diplomatic channels

¶11. (C) On the diplomatic front, Sheikh Mohammed and his brothers Hamdan and Hazza rarely miss an opportunity to talk to high-level USG interlocutors about the influence of the "Muslim Brotherhood" on moderate-thinking Emiratis. In a meeting with Deputy Secretary Armitage on April 20, Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed noted that UAE security forces had identified "50 to 60" Emirati Muslim Brothers in the Armed Forces, and that a senior Muslim Brotherhood sympathizer is within one of the ruling families - a reference, we believe, to Sharjah Ruler Sheikh Sultan Al Qassimi (see para 7), whose ties to Saudi Arabia are well known. Sheikh Mohammed has told us that the security services estimate there are up to 700 Muslim Brotherhood sympathizers in the UAE. He also said that when the Armed Forces discovered Muslim Brotherhood sympathizers within their ranks, they were arrested and given a form of reverse brainwashing. All but one of the 40 military personnel detained were subsequently released, convinced that they had been led astray, he said (Ref. E). Sheikh Hamdan told us in October 2002 that during deliberations of a high-level committee to set policy on "Muslim Brotherhood" activity in the UAE after the events of 9/11, he had advocated extremely tough measures against extremists, but that his brothers Khalifa (recently elected President), Mohammed, Hazza, and Dubai Crown Prince Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid had voted in favor of a more graduated approach (Ref. H).

¶12. (C) In Dubai, the authorities (including de facto ruler Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid) describe a more low-key approach to dealing with citizens who have become "misled" into looking at the world from an extremist perspective. The Dubai security services "track" individuals known to be sympathetic to the Islamist agenda, including those returning from conflict areas like Afghanistan. When Dubayyans of that ilk come to the attention of the security services, Sheikh Mohammed often meets with them to explain to them the error of their ways, and to tell them that if they are looking for a job, or land, or any other assistance, they should not hesitate to ask. Apparently, this approach (direct appeal from the ruler) is often effective, especially for younger devotees. Those who are resistant to change, however, are locked up, sometimes repeatedly, for months at a time in hopes that this will dissuade them from acting on their Islamist tendencies.

Comment:

¶13. (C) The trend toward a more conservative brand of Islam shows no signs of subsiding. The UAE's leadership is particularly concerned by the presence of Islamic extremists and the potential for terrorism. The well

established effort to check Islamist influence that began under Sheikh Zayed seems certain to continue under his sons: a government that is prepared to spend millions of dollars to build a security wall to keep individuals deemed security risks from coming over the border is not going to let Islamists already within the UAE to stir up trouble. The government is taking positive steps to prevent further growth of this movement, including border security, education reform, and aggressive action against suspected extremists. A greater effort to provide economic opportunities to the citizens in the poorer northern emirates would address the discontent that can be a further breeding ground for extremism.

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